KING DAVID AND HIS WIVES

DAVID PINSKI

Augusta Freda Alpert

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BY

DAVID PINSKI

TRANSLATED FROM THE YIDDISH BY
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MICHAL

Chapter XVII

25 And the men of Israel said, Have ye seen this man that is come up? surely to defy Israel is he come up: and it shall be, *that* the man who killeth him, the king will enrich him with great riches, and will give him his daughter, and make his father's house free in Israel.

* * *

45 Then said David to the Philistine . . . I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied.

Chapter XVIII

7 And the women answered *one another* as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.

9 And Saul eyed David from that day and forward.

* * *

17 And Saul said to David, Behold my elder daughter Merab, her will I give thee to wife.

18 And David said unto Saul, Who *am* I? and what *is* my life, *or* my father's family in Israel, that I should be son in law to the king?

* * *

20 And Michal Saul's daughter loved David: and they told Saul, and the thing pleased him.

* * *

25 And Saul said, Thus shall ye say to David, The King desireth not any dowry, but a hundred foreskins of the Philistines, to be avenged of the king's enemies. But Saul thought to make David fall by the hand of the Philistines.

26 And when his servants told David these words, it pleased David well.

MICHAL

PERSONS

David
Michal
Jonathan
Saul
Saul's Suite

SCENE

A luxuriant spot in the garden of King Saul. *To the right and left, various paths that wind among the thickly growing trees. In the middle of the high, rocky background, which is matted with wild growths, is a narrow path approached by a flight of steps hewn out of the rock. It is a spring morning. Sunrise.*

David

[*Stands upon the top step, as if framed in foliage, leaning against his harp. His eyes are raised to the distant sky, which is gradually becoming brighter; they shine with an inspired,*

joyful, exalted fire. His fingers find their way instinctively to the strings of his harp and pluck, hesitantly, several strong, warm chords. Soon he begins to declaim, slowly.]

"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun."

MICHAL

[*Appears at the right. She hides behind a tree and listens with bated breath, closing her eyes and clenching her fists in passionate ecstasy.*]

DAVID

[*Is unaware of her presence. He continues to declaim undisturbed, and with greater exaltation than before.*]

"Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a

race. His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it; and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof. . . ."

MICHAL

[*She has stepped out of hiding. Her eyes are still closed. She is quite pale and breathes heavily.*]

DAVID

[*Feeling her presence before seeing her, his hand trembles, and his playing is abruptly terminated by a false, weak chord. He closes his eyes and stands as if in a trance.*]

MICHAL

[*At the sound of the last chord her eyes open. Her face assumes a hard, cold expression. She is about to withdraw.*]

DAVID

[*Whispering*] Michal?

MICHAL

[*Proud and cold*] I was taking my morning walk.

DAVID

[*Opens his eyes and looks at her. Calmly.*]
The King's daughter, all alone?

MICHAL

Does Michal need a bodyguard? Must she be watched at every step? I like to be alone and undisturbed.

DAVID

[*Slowly raises his harp and moves as if to leave by the narrow path behind him*]
I understand. You need make your wish no clearer to me. Farewell, daughter of the king!

MICHAL

[*Quickly*] I did not mean you. I believe I am the intruder, and that *I* should go.

DAVID

You are the princess, and I must yield place to you.

[*Bows and is about to leave.*]

MICHAL

You broke off your song in the middle. Will you not sing it to the end?

DAVID

[*Sadly, with his eyes closed*] I shall not be able.

MICHAL

I'll go away. I'll not disturb you.

DAVID

My heart is no longer in my song.

MICHAL

You were singing the glories of the day and of the sun, the greatness of God and his splendor.

DAVID

That was liberation,—for a moment only.

MICHAL

Liberation?

DAVID

[*Hastily*] Dwell in peace, Michal!
[*Turns, as if to go.*]

MICHAL

[*With an outcry*] David!

DAVID

[*Stops, turns back. For awhile they look at each other in silence. As if hypnotized, without removing his glance from her,* DAVID *slowly descends the steps and comes over to* MICHAL. *Now they are close to one another, eyeing each other with penetrating glances.*]

MICHAL

[*At last breaking the silence, softly and bashfully*]
You said, liberation.

DAVID

[*Very sadly*] I lay all night upon my pillow, torn with despair.

MICHAL

With despair?

DAVID

Until finally, with the first rays of dawn, I made a resolution.

MICHAL

A resolution?

DAVID

And I sought my harp, and stole quietly away from my room and from the king's castle.

MICHAL

[*With embarrassed laughter*] Not quietly enough.

DAVID

Did I wake you?

MICHAL

My sleep too—was—restless. [*Hastily*] But tell me of your despair, and your resolution and your liberation.

DAVID

It was still dark when I stole forth, my eyes and my feet were turned toward the West, where everything was veiled in deepest shadow. It seemed to me that I had stepped into a sea of darkness, and that black waves engulfed me. But within me it was even darker. Heavily and bitterly my spirit wept, and heavily and bitterly my harp sang back to me, its strings stirred by the gloom.

MICHAL

[*Turns away her head, her eyes brimming with tears.*]

DAVID

But when I had reached this last step, and before the greater darkness of the narrow path had swallowed me, I turned my face to the East, back to the road over which I had already traveled, to the palace of your father. And what I saw made me forget my sadness.

MICHAL

[*With mingled curiosity and surprise*] Ah!

DAVID

I thought to behold the same dense darkness, but my eyes were greeted by a stream of morning light. This surprised me, astounded me quite, and roused my thoughts from my sadness. I raised my eyes to heaven, and a gray cloud, faintly tipped with red, captivated my sight. At first I did not realize what I saw, and the reddened darkness was a riddle to me. I looked more sharply, and soon began to smile in happy forgetfulness and the blessed delight of the scene. On the cloud lay the first touch of the rising sun. As if in merry dance my eyes darted across the wide sky, seeking the red spots, the tokens of the day-star. With each moment they grew in number, and with every second the dark red became brighter and still more bright. And soon the sun itself appeared from behind the palace of the king in all its golden-red fiery splendor. My heart flowed over, and from my lips began to pour the song—

MICHAL

And then I came.

DAVID

[*Lowers his head.*]

MICHAL

[*Softly; after a brief silence*] What was your resolution?

DAVID

To leave the king's palace forever.

MICHAL

Ah! That is what I suspected!

DAVID

I can remain here no longer.

MICHAL

I know. The king's hatred is driving you away.

DAVID

[*Turns his face aside.*]

MICHAL

But David need not steal away from the king. Let him leave the king like a man.

DAVID

Saul will be content if I never show myself again.

MICHAL

[*With meaning*] I believe that the king is your debtor. You have a claim upon him.

DAVID

The king owes me nothing.

MICHAL

Owes you nothing? [*Laughs with embarrassment*] Did he not, then, promise great wealth to the conqueror of Goliath?

DAVID

I did not slay Goliath for money.

MICHAL

Not for money?

DAVID

Not for the most boundless treasures and not for the freedom of my father's house.

MICHAL

[*Her face brightening*] Then you slew him—you slew him—[*Suddenly changing to a harsh tone*] Why do you not claim me of the king?

DAVID

[*Falling on his knees before her, and hiding his face in her dress.*]

Michal!

MICHAL

[*Her face again brightening; she speaks triumphantly.*]

Ah! You did not desire the king's prize—you wanted my love! Ah! Why were you silent all the time? Why did you avoid me? I have loved you for a long time already,—I have loved you from the first time I saw you. I was in the king's camp when he was in the field against Goliath and the Philistines, and of all the king's daughters Saul offered me, me alone, as reward for Goliath's head. Is any of the king's daughters more beautiful than I? Am I not the youngest? Does not the king love me best of all his daughters? Am I not worth the head of Goliath, the

Philistine? How it grieved me that of all the heroes of Israel none appeared against Goliath! How it affronted me that none found courage within him, although *I* was the prize! But then you came forth, young and handsome, with blond hair and cheeks so red—how wildly my heart began to beat, and what rejoicing there was within me! And I thanked God that none had come before you. And when you took your place against the giant, I fell upon my knees and prayed to God for you. Oh, how I prayed! And I won the certainty that you would conquer, because you were waging battle for me as the prize, and then you would come and claim me of my father. Oh, you should have done so! *That* you should have done! But you did not come. Ah, you did not claim me. And I was waiting for you!

DAVID

[*As before*] Michal!

MICHAL

[*Bending down to him and taking his face in her hands.*]

I was waiting for you, and could not imagine what held you back. What a fright I had when

the king offered you my sister Merab, and how I rejoiced when you refused her. And my heart became heavier than ever because you did not come and claim me as your just reward. Ah, David, how I have suffered through you! You robbed me of rest by day and of sleep by night. But it was well that I did not sleep, and that I lay listening for you. For that is how I heard you leave your room and the palace today, and at once I followed you by the tracks left by your feet. Ah! How could you have wished to run away! How could you have wished to forsake me! But now you know it! I love you! Oh, how I love you. My body and soul belong to you! Now come before the king and demand your prize! Come, David; come, my hero, my champion!

DAVID

[*With an outburst, burying his face in his hands.*]

I cannot, Michal! I cannot!

MICHAL

[*Recoiling, in fright*] You cannot!

JONATHAN

[*Comes running in.*]
Oh, here you are! Quickly, the king is seeking you! [*Looks at both of them in astonishment.*] What has come over you both? What's taken place?—Have you heard? The king is seeking you and he is in one of his most terrible fits of anger. They told him that both of you rose early and stole away from the palace. He fell into a fury at once—one of those raging attacks that the Evil Spirit sends to him so often these days—and berated and cursed all his servants, and then woke me from my sleep with the vilest of oaths. I must know where you are, he said, whither you had run off and what you had made up between you. And when he could learn nothing from me, because I myself knew nothing about it—convinced that I knew and simply did not wish to tell—he sent out his servants with orders to find you and bring you to him dead or alive.—Haven't you heard me?—Why do you stand there like that?

MICHAL

[*In her great fright she stands motionless, her*

eyes riveted upon DAVID, *as if she were still waiting for him to explain his words. It seems as if she has not heard* JONATHAN'S *warning—not even noticed his presence.*]

DAVID

[*At* JONATHAN'S *appearance he has slowly arisen. His head, however, is still lowered, as if he, too, has not heard* JONATHAN'S *warning, not even heeded him.*]

JONATHAN

In God's name, what has happened between you?

DAVID

[*Softly, with lowered eyes*]
I have just told your sister that I cannot take her as my wife.

JONATHAN

You cannot?

DAVID

[*With a deep sigh*] No.

JONATHAN

You must marry the king's daughter. She was promised to him who should slay Goliath, the Philistine. Are you not he, perhaps, who has freed us from Goliath and the Philistines? Was it not *your* stone, that stretched the giant out dead? The king's daughter belongs to you.

DAVID

Not for her sake did I go forth against Goliath, not for the sake of becoming the king's son-in-law did I slay the giant. I did it because he had blasphemed God and God's people. I fought only for God and His name.

MICHAL

[*Breathes heavily, clenches her fists and utters a sob of deep anguish.*]

JONATHAN

But your reward is the king's daughter.

DAVID

I dare not receive the reward. For the scoffers

would come and sneer: "David said that he was battling on the side of God, but what he really meant was the king's daughter and the king's wealth."

JONATHAN

What do you care? God sees your heart and knows the truth.

MICHAL

[*Laughs.*]

DAVID

My deed must be as pure in the eyes of people as it is in the eyes of God. All men must know and none must doubt. Only the love of God gave strength to my arm, not the love of the king's daughter or the pursuit of wealth and honor. How will they know this if I become the king's son-in-law?

JONATHAN

Will you sacrifice your love out of fear of the gossip of evil human tongues?

DAVID

I will sacrifice it to God's name, just as I was ready to sacrifice my life to Him.

MICHAL

[*Sobbing, with fright in her voice.*]

JONATHAN

[*After a brief pause, looking at* DAVID *with a penetrating glance.*]

Why then are you so sad? Why do you look so unhappy?

DAVID

[*Turns away.*]

JONATHAN

You offered your life with gladness. You went forth to meet Goliath as if to a dance. Then why should the sacrifice of your love make you so sad? You are doing it for God; you should be joyful.

DAVID

[*Bitterly*] Ah! Do not laugh at me, and do not add mockery to my sufferings.

JONATHAN

But am I not speaking the truth?

DAVID

You have never loved.

JONATHAN

Then hear me, and take Michal as your wife. Give me your hand,—give me your hands, both of you; I will unite you and speak, too, in your behalf to the king. I will say to him that his son paid the debt which he did not want to pay.

[*To* DAVID]

Come and receive my blessing. Hail, great conqueror! They will not dare to speak against you. The whole people heard the king's proclamation, and yet none dared to step forth against Goliath. Only he who was armored in the love of God was possessed of the daring, and to him God gave the strength. Surely all must see this and understand.

DAVID

You have never loved.

JONATHAN

What does that mean?

DAVID

Those who love would have found the courage within them.

JONATHAN

You really think so?

DAVID

I know it for certain. Let another Goliath appear today, and let the king offer Michal as reward; I will accept his offer and declare to him, before all the people: "My king, I love your daughter Michal and will joyfully risk my life for her."

JONATHAN

So you crave still another Goliath to make you happy! Ha-ha! But I love you too much and would not wish to see you in danger before a second giant. Come; do not be obstinate. Just look at Michal—You must not let her suffer so.

MICHAL

Speak not of my sufferings, Jonathan. I shall suffer no more.

JONATHAN

The proud Michal speaks thus. Be patient, sister, speak nothing against your love.

MICHAL

Michal, the king's daughter, will not share her love, not even with God!

JONATHAN

Those are proud words, but what does your heart say to them? Ah, I have never loved, but I know the ways of love better far than you. God has planted a flower in your hearts. Let it not wither. Come, I am the oldest, and you must both obey me. Give me your hand, David, and let the idle tongues wag idly on. Come, sister, and let not your heart bleed from your pride. Or shall our father's pledge stay unfulfilled? The king made a promise; the king's children shall keep it for him.

SAUL

[*Steals suddenly out from the right, where he has been hiding in a clump of trees. Several servants accompany him.*]

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You rebellious son of a rebellious mother! You told me a lie before, saying you did not know where they were and what they had conspired between them. And now again, you lie deep down in your throat when you say that I haven't kept my word.

JONATHAN

You may berate me and my mother, for you are father and husband—king and ruler besides. But I told no lie. I met them here by accident and only then did I learn what was going on between them. And have you kept the word that you gave before all the people? Have you given the conqueror of Goliath your daughter to wife?

SAUL

Worthless son, may your lie choke your throat like boiling lead! Did I not offer your conqueror of Goliath my daughter Merab? He refused her, and I am freed from my pledge.

JONATHAN

Did you proclaim Merab the reward for Goliath's head? You offered a daughter; if he does not wish the one, you must grant him the other.

SAUL

[*Furious, pointing his clenched fist at* JONATHAN] Ah-h-h-h!

MICHAL

[*Quickly*] The king is freed from his word.

[*General astonishment.*]

SAUL

[*Restrains his wild outburst and turns his head slowly toward* MICHAL.]

What!

MICHAL

The conquerer of Goliath did not even accept the king's conditions.

JONATHAN

Sister!

SAUL

[*Turning his wild glances from* MICHAL *to* DAVID, *and from* DAVID *back to* MICHAL]
He did not accept my conditions?

MICHAL

He fought only for God, and battled against Goliath only to avenge the insults to God's name.

SAUL

[*Furious*] You lying shepherd; that wasn't your answer to me when I offered Merab to you! You crawled like a worm, bowed abjectly and spoke in utter humility. You were too lowly and unworthy, you said, and the match was altogether above you. Ah, how I hate you, you good-for-nothing slayer of ten thousands, with all your lying and deception.

DAVID

Because Saul does not believe me, I gave him an answer that would be most flattering to his ears. But God is my witness that I love your daughter Michal with a burning, holy love and did not claim her of you. I have her love, too, yet I can-

not take her as my wife. I preferred to steal away from your house, that the beloved sight of your daughter should not torture me. I slew Goliath only for God.

MICHAL

Give him another Goliath, and he will slay him for me.

JONATHAN

[*In great fright*] Sister!

SAUL

What?

MICHAL

He said so himself.

JONATHAN

Sister, what is your purpose?

DAVID

Yes. I said so myself. Give me even an army of Goliaths, and in the name of my love for your daughter I will go into battle against them.

JONATHAN

David, speak not like that. The king owes his daughter to you.

SAUL

Silence! I'll let you know at once what you owe to the king, and close your mouth for you forever. [*To* DAVID] Do I owe you anything, harp-twanger?

DAVID

Nothing.

SAUL

Did I promise you anything and fail to keep my promise, stone-slinger?

DAVID

You never promised anything to me in private, and what you promised in your proclamation was not for me.

SAUL

[*To* JONATHAN] Do you hear what the shepherd says? Don't you claim from me what he

himself doesn't claim! Ha-ha-ha! . . . [*To* MICHAL] And you love the slayer of Goliath?

MICHAL

[*Breathing heavily*] No, not the slayer of Goliath.

SAUL

Ah-h-h, Ha-ha-ha-ha! The proud princess! Come to my arms! You are my own true blood. Not for nothing does Saul love you best of all his children. The others are not his kind. See that worthless wretch there? His father and the throne itself are less to him than the shepherd! . . . Ha-ha-ha! . . . "No, not the slayer of Goliath" Ha-ha-ha. . . . But *him* you love, *him!* The harpist, the blond locks, the ruddy cheeks, the lithe body, the handsome fellow, the splendid mien, that worm, that viper? *Him*, him you love? Yes, you love him, you love him! Don't curl your pretty lips! Don't ask your pride! Don't turn your head away. You love him, I can see. I am old and impetuous and ill-tempered, but I remember well the signs of love and how it inflames the blood. You love

—you love him. You are no better than your brother! Away from me! Ha-ha-ha! And he loves you! "With a burning, holy love" he loves you! Ha—! Do you love her, sheep-driver? Do you love her, insect?

MICHAL

Father!

SAUL

Ha-ha-ha! That struck home! Do you love her, bear-slayer?

DAVID

You have already heard my answer. And as to your insults, king, I have more than once answered you and our people.

SAUL

How proud! The women's champion! The hero in the songs of old and wasted harlots! But soon we'll see your heroism, and what your word is worth. Hear, all of you, my word, and King Saul *keeps* his word: Jesse's son shall receive my daughter for his wife, if he brings to

me, for her, the heads of a hundred Philistines as a dowry.

JONATHAN

[*In great fright*] Father!
[*Covers his head.*]

MICHAL

Ah-h!
[*Looks at* DAVID *in keen suspense. There is a murmur of amazement and fright among the men of the king's suite.*]

DAVID

[*With enthusiasm*] I accept your challenge, my king!

MICHAL

[*Laughing, her entire countenance beaming.*]

SAUL

And I will keep my word. The heads of a hundred Philistines, and she is yours!

DAVID

May God bless you, king. You have given me

back my peace of mind. Now I shall be happy! Must I leave you at once, my king?

SAUL

At once!

DAVID

Then I go straightway, and may God restore your joyous spirit, even as you have given me back my own. Farewell, my king! Uncover your head, my Jonathan! See, in your David every fibre sings and rejoices; your David is full of power and courage. Come, kiss me and help me chant my joy! Do you not believe in me? I will be the victor. Do you believe in me, Michal? Farewell, my bride! Give me your hand to press. But I shall long for your lips, and the Philistines will have to pay dearly for my longing. Ha-a! My love has been freed and it has won the strength of Samson! I go! Tremble, ye Philistines!

[*Turns to leave.*]

MICHAL

[*Frightened*] David! Father!

DAVID

[*Stops, and looks back.*]

JONATHAN

[*Raises his head.*]

SAUL

Who spoke those words? I do not recognize the voice.

MICHAL

[*Composed, resolutely*] Nothing . . . I thought —a hundred Philistines were too many.

SAUL

For you?

DAVID

A hundred Philistines too many for my Michal? It shall be two hundred! My Michal, I love you!

[*Walks off with closed eyes, breathing audibly, his arms outstretched as if for an embrace.*]

SAUL

Ha-ha-ha! The liar! Ha-ha-ha! He will never return!

JONATHAN

[*Despairingly*] Sister, what have you done?

MICHAL

[*Transfigured, exalted, with a joyful expression upon her face, she breathes heavily.*]
He loves—me! . . . He will conquer! . . .

ABIGAIL

Chapter XXV

2 And *there was* a man in Maon, whose possessions *were* in Carmel; and the man *was* very great, and he had three thousand sheep, and a thousand goats: and he was shearing his sheep in Carmel.

3 Now the name of the man *was* Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail; and *she was* a woman of good understanding, and of a beautiful countenance: but the man *was* churlish and evil in his doings. . . .

5 And David sent out ten young men, and David said unto the young men, Get you up to Carmel, and go to Nabal, and greet him in my name.

6 And thus shall ye say to him: Peace *be* both to thee, and peace *be* to thine house, and peace *be* unto all that thou hast.

7 And now I have heard that thou hast shearers: now thy shepherds which were with us, we hurt them not, neither was there aught missing unto them, all the while they were in Carmel.

8 Ask thy young men, and they will shew thee. Wherefore let the young men find favour in thine eyes; for we come in a good day: give, I pray thee, whatsoever cometh to thine hand unto thy servants, and to thy son David.

9 And when David's young men came, they spake to Nabal according to all those words in the name of David, and ceased.

10 And Nabal answered David's servants, and said, Who *is* David? and who *is* the son of Jesse? there be many servants nowadays that break away every man from his master.

11 Shall I then take my bread, and my water, and my flesh that I have killed for my shearers, and give *it* unto men, whom I know not whence they *be*?

12 So David's young men turned their way, and went again, and came and told him all those sayings.

13 And David said unto his men, Gird ye on every man his sword. And they girded on every man his sword; and David also girded on his sword: and there went up after David about four hundred men; and two hundred abode by the stuff.

* * *

18 Then Abigail made haste, and took two hundred loaves, and two bottles of wine, and five sheep ready dressed, and five measure of parched *corn*, and a hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, and laid *them* on asses.

* * *

19 And she said unto her servants, Go on before me; behold, I come after you. But she told not her husband Nabal.

* * *

23 And when Abigail saw David, she hasted, and lighted off the ass, and fell before David on her face, and bowed herself to the ground.

* * *

35 So David received of her hand *that* which she had brought him, and said unto her, Go up in peace to thine house; see, I have hearkened to thy voice, and have accepted thy person.

36 And Abigail came to Nabal; and, behold, he held a feast in his house, like the feast of a king; and Nabal's heart *was* merry within him, for he *was* very drunken: wherefore she told him nothing, less or more, until the morning light.

37 But it came to pass in the morning, when the wine was gone out of Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became *as* a stone.

38 And it came to pass about ten days *after*, that the LORD smote Nabal, that he died.

39 And when David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, Blessed *be* the LORD, that hath pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Nabal, and hath kept

his servant from evil: for the LORD hath returned the wickedness of Nabal upon his own head. And David sent and communed with Abigail, to take her to him to wife.

40 And when the servants of David were come to Abigail to Carmel, they spake unto her, saying, David sent us unto thee, to take thee to him to wife.

41 And she arose, and bowed herself on *her* face to the earth, and said, Behold, *let* thine handmaid *be* a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.

ABIGAIL

PERSONS

DAVID

ABIGAIL

NABAL, Abigail's Husband

ABIATHAR, The Priest

AHIMELECH

JOAB
ABISHAI } Sons of Zeruiah, David's Sister
ASAHEL

A Servant of Abigail's Suite

A Servant of Nabal's Suite

David's Men

Vassals of Abigail and Nabal

SCENE

DAVID'S *camp, in a rocky spot of the Wilderness of Paran.* DAVID, *his sword across his knee, is seated upon a stone in the centre. In front of him, upon the earth, sit* ABIATHAR *and* AHIMELECH. ASAHEL, *stretched before* DAVID, *almost*

touches with his head the knees of the leader. Around and about, in various postures, are DAVID'S *men,—exhausted, famished, with the burning noonday sun playing down upon them. All eyes are turned toward the left, in tense expectation.*

ASAHEL

[*To* AHIMELECH, *stretching out his closed fists.*]

Guess which hand contains the stone. If you divine rightly, then Nabal has granted our request; if not, then he has made light of David's words.

AHIMELECH

[*Ill-humoredly*] And will that still my hunger?

ASAHEL

It is but a pastime. If your stomach be angry, appease it with play. You will not guess?—Hm!—Priest Abiathar, you? You are indeed a diviner.

ABIATHAR

Hold bread in your fists, then I should guess correctly.

ASAHEL

A mouse could do that better. Ah! You are an ill-humored tribe; there is no playing with you.

[*Turns to* DAVID.]

Why sit you so distraught, my uncle? What are you thinking of? Whither fly your thoughts? Are you brooding over the past? Or are you piercing the future?—To behold you in thought is my pleasure. I have no thoughts of my own, so I would fain guess yours. And I sit and ponder, and ponder. . . .

DAVID

[*In subdued laughter*] Ha-ha!

ASAHEL

Were you thinking of Saul? Or of Jonathan? Or—or of Michal, your wife?—Oh! I have hurt you!—Perhaps you would have your harp?

[*Angry laughter is heard.* ASAHEL *mocks it.*]

Ha-ha-ha!

[*To* DAVID.]

Sing something.

[*The laughter is repeated.*]

DAVID

[*Lays his hand with utmost kindness upon* ASAHEL'S *head.*]

JOAB

Better ask him to gird his sword. He should have followed my counsel from the very beginning. Instead of sending ten of us, all of us should have gone; and instead of sending to Nabal a request, we should have made our point with our lances. Had we done so, we should not now be sitting, listening to the music of our empty stomachs.

[*Murmuring of the men*]

Certainly— Naturally— He speaks justly.

JOAB

No asking for things, say I. One should never ask.

AHIMELECH

It would have been better had we sent to his wife. She, so they say, is as good as she is beautiful. But he,—he is an unworthy wretch.

ASAHEL

He will not dare to refuse us after the boons he has received from our hands.

JOAB

Ha-ha-ha! . . . Saul, too, received boons from our hands, and unendingly, yet—ha-ha-ha! Here we are, stranded in the Wilderness of Paran, suffering hunger and thirst. There was a time when, if we had ceased to play our rôle as benefactors, we would now be serving the King of Judea.

DAVID

[*Sternly*] Joab!

[*Murmuring of the men*]

The King of Judea— Yea, the King of Judea!

DAVID

That word must be forgotten! As long as he

lives, Saul is our king; nor I nor any that be true to me shall harm a hair of his head. He is the anointed of God. The son of Zeruiah believes that he is true to me and loves me when he speaks of kingdom. Little does he know how grievously he insults me.

JOAB

We shall never understand one another.

DAVID

Then keep silence, and learn to understand me.

JOAB

Then explain to me, why the ten messengers to Nabal? For he is not Saul, the anointed of God. Why the soft speech and the prayerful language? "Peace be both to you, and to your house, and peace be unto all that you have!" . . . Fie!

DAVID

King you would have me of Judea, yet ask that I stoop to robbery.

JOAB

Comport yourself like a king! Give orders! Rule! Command!

DAVID

[*Sternly*] Then I command you to keep silence. Rouse not the impatience of the men.

ASAHEL

I should have gone. You should have sent me, the fleet of foot. Then had I long returned hither.

[*Voices from the left.*]
They come! They come!—They come empty-handed!

JOAB

Ha-ha-ha!

DAVID

Empty hand—

[*Seizes his sword, arises, and shouts to the returning messengers.*]

Faster, I say! I must know the answer this instant!

[*Voices.*]

Faster! David must know the answer this instant!

[ABISHAL *advances from the left with his men.*]

DAVID

You return empty-handed?

ABISHAI

As you behold.

DAVID

Has he perchance sent something after you?

ABISHAI

His scorn.

DAVID

Then surely must you in some manner have affronted him. You could not restrain your bitter tongue, and before you had opened your mouth to speak, you must have lost your patience. You are after all a brother to Joab.

ABISHAI

My companions are my witnesses. I delivered him your entreaty word for word, even as you gave it to me. Over the whole way did I repeat it to myself, schooling myself in the task of prayerful request. Not a word of yours did I omit—my companions are my witnesses. Nor did I add a single word. They can corroborate me. I did not lose my patience, not even when he insulted you and us. Speak I the truth, friends?

COMPANIONS

The very truth!

ABISHAI

We did not have our swords with us. You took them from us.

DAVID

[*Impatiently*] Tell your story!

ABISHAI

We came to Nabal in Carmel and I said to him: "We come to you with greetings of peace from

David, son of Jesse." His sour visage turned more sour, but I bethought me of your counsel, nor did my voice continue in the least less friendly. "Thus has David ordered us to speak: Long life to you—

[*A murmur of resentment among the men.*]

—and peace be both to you and to your house, and peace be unto all that you have."

[JOAB *laughs derisively.*]

ABISHAI

"And now I have heard that you are shearing your sheep; now your shepherds which were with us, we hurt them not, neither was there aught missing to them, all the while they were in Carmel. Ask your young men and they will show you. Wherefore let my young men find favor in your eyes; for we come in a good day. Give, I pray you, whatsoever comes to your hand unto your servants and to your son David."

JOAB

Your son David! Your son David!

ABISHAI

Thus spoke I to him, word for word, and in manner most abject and prayerful.

[*To his companions.*]

Is it not true?

A COMPANION

We burned with shame, so beggarly was his demeanor.

ABISHAI

[*Between his teeth*] And oh! How it boiled within me!

DAVID

[*Impatient*] And then?

ABISHAI

He turned from us, and with angry scorn, departed.

[DAVID *raises his sword.*]

ABISHAI

Now comes the worst. We lay down upon the earth and resolved to wait for a clearer, fuller

reply. And behold—the answer came. We had well rested ourselves from our journey, and he, no longer able to endure the sight of us, came in high dudgeon, shouting wildly: "Who is David, and who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants nowadays that break away every man from his master!"

JOAB

What! And he spoke thus?

ABISHAI

"Shall I then take my bread, and my water, and my flesh that I have killed for my shearers and give it unto men, whom I know not whence they be?"

[*Stops suddenly.*]

DAVID

[*Hoarsely*] Well, continue!

ABISHAI

That is all. He left us, and we—obeyed you. We departed without punishing him. We did not have our swords—

DAVID

[*With the full strength of his voice*] Gird you on every man his sword!

[*Commotion in the camp.* DAVID's *command is heard repeated along the lines, and there is a noise of swords.* DAVID, *girding on his sword, to* JOAB.]

Four hundred come with me, and two hundred remain on guard. Choose the stronger, those who have suffered less from exhaustion and hunger, and let them here remain.

JOAB

What can you mean by this? Your command is quite the reverse of reason.

DAVID

You will never understand me. Those who have suffered most from exhaustion and hunger must be the first to eat.

JOAB

[*Tapping his forehead*] I see!

[*Turning to* ABISHAI, AHIMELECH *and* ABIATHAR.]

Come, let us choose those for the expedition and those for the guard.

[JOAB *and the three to whom he has spoken are soon lost among the soldiers.*]

DAVID

Not a vestige shall remain of him or his. They all shall die!

ASAHEL

Even his beautiful wife?

DAVID

Death! Death! Men and women alike, that not even a memory of him remain! The very place which witnessed his insult to me must be razed and devastated! Death! Death! Death to every creature and every thing!

[*Voices*]

A caravan approaches! Behold! A caravan!

JOAB

[*Hurrying forward*] A caravan of asses, laden with food, comes this way—

DAVID

Let it pass through! Let it pass on! Let no man dare lay hand upon it! Today we shall sate ourselves with Nabal's blood and possessions.

[*Several* SERVANTS *run up and prostrate themselves before* DAVID.]

DAVID

Who are these?

ABIATHAR

Heralds of the caravan.

DAVID

Arise, and go your way in peace.

YOUNG MAN

We have run ahead to apprise you that our mistress approaches.

DAVID

Your mistress? Who is your mistress? Comes she to me?

YOUNG MAN

To you. She is Abigail, the wife of Nabal.

DAVID

How now! Away from me! Take them away from me! Spare them not!

[*Turns away.*]

[*The young men kneel before* DAVID, *clasping his garments and wailing.* DAVID'S *men are about to tear them away.*]

DAVID

Surely in vain have I kept all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that pertains unto him; and he has requited me evil for good.

ABIGAIL

[*Enters, riding upon an ass.*]

DAVID

[*Does not notice her, and speaks in an acrid voice to the vassals before him*] So and more also do God unto the enemies of David, if I leave of all that pertains to him by the morning light a single living . . .

[*Suddenly notices* ABIGAIL, *and stops as if*

smitten with her beauty, ending his sentence in a confused low voice.]

. . . a . . . single . . . male . . . creature.

[*The men about him notice David's features and his confusion. They look around, behold* ABIGAIL, *and walk off, releasing her servants, who rush to her for protection. Silence.*]

ABIGAIL

[*Descends from the ass, and prostrates herself before* DAVID'S *feet.*]

[DAVID *withdraws from her.*]

[ABIGAIL *approaches him once more. Oppressive silence.*]

JOAB

[*Commanding suddenly*] On to Nabal!

ABIGAIL

[*Quickly rising upon her knees, stretching her hands imploringly to* DAVID.]

Oh, my lord, I am the guilty one!

DAVID

[*With ironic laughter*] Indeed!

ABIGAIL

Let your handmaid, I pray you, speak in your audience. Hear, I pray, the words of your handmaid!

DAVID

Nabal must die!

ABIGAIL

Let not my lord, I pray you, regard this man of Belial, even Nabal: for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name and folly is with him. Could you have expected aught else of him? Could you have awaited from him other than a denial? But I—

DAVID

Did you, too, revile my men and send them away empty-handed?

ABIGAIL

I, your handmaid, have not seen the young men you sent.

DAVID

Is *that* your crime?

ABIGAIL

Oh, my lord! As the Lord lives and as your soul lives, and as the Lord has more than once withheld you from shedding blood, and from avenging yourself with your own hand— Was not Saul in thy hands?

DAVID

The king!

ABIGAIL

Oh, my lord! Your greatest enemy, yet did you not kill him. Now let your other enemies, and they that seek evil to you, have no greater worth than Nabal.

DAVID

I must stamp out the vermin.

ABIGAIL

See the gift which your handmaid has brought to her lord: let it be given to the young men that serve you.

DAVID

Would you bribe me? Would you wipe away my insult with your gift?

ABIGAIL

Oh, forgive the trespass of your handmaid: for the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house; because my lord fights the battles of the Lord, and evil has not been found in you all your days.

DAVID

I do no evil when I punish.

ABIGAIL

Oh, leave that to God! And should a man arise to pursue you, and to seek your soul, the soul of my lord will be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord your God; and the souls of your enemies, them shall he sling out as out of the middle of a sling.

DAVID

What manner of speech is this?

ABIGAIL

And it shall come to pass, when the Lord shall have done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and shall have appointed you ruler over Israel, that this shall be no grief unto you either that you have shed blood causeless or that my lord has avenged himself with his own hand. And God shall deal well with you and you will remember your handmaid.

[*Falls prostrate before* DAVID, *with arms extended. Her servants, in great fright, approach with subdued wailing.*]

[DAVID *about to raise* ABIGAIL.]

[ASAHEL *anticipating* DAVID, *raises* ABIGAIL *to her knees, puts her arm about his neck and helps her to her feet.*]

JOAB

Our men are waiting, David. I go with them.

[DAVID *does not reply, nor does he remove his gaze from* ABIGAIL.]

[ABIGAIL *trembling at* JOAB'S *words opens*

wide her eyes, and gazes at DAVID *in mute appeal.*]

DAVID

[*After regarding her silently*] You were not—sent—

ABIGAIL

Raises her hands to him in fright.]

DAVID

You say that—you would—have me—

[ABIGAIL *about to kneel before him again.*]

ASAHEL

[*Prevents her.*]

DAVID

[*After regarding* ABIGAIL *in silence.*] Blessed be the Lord God of Israel which sent you this day to meet me, and blessed be your advice, and blessed be you, which have kept me this day from coming to shed blood and from avenging myself with my own hand.

ABIGAIL

[*Relieved and happy*] Oh, my lord!

DAVID

For in very deed, as the Lord God of Israel lives, which has kept me from hurting you, except you had hasted and come to meet me, surely there had not been left unto Nabal by the morning light a single . . . a single . . . male creature.

ABIGAIL

[*Lowers her eyes, with a sigh of relief*]
Blessed be God!
[*Raises her eyes to* DAVID]
Will you now accept my gift?

DAVID

With thanks.

ABIGAIL

Two hundred loaves of bread I have brought—will they suffice? For I knew not how great was the number of your men—and two bottles of wine—surely they will not be enough. Five sheep ready dressed, five measures of parched

corn, an hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs. This is all that in my haste I could have placed upon the asses.

DAVID

It will suffice.

[*Calls out.*]

Soldiers! There is food to eat! Prepare your meal!

[*Amid cries of "Food!" "Food!" the men make toward the left, in the direction of the asses.*]

JOAB

[*Angrily*] Wise Nabal! With this little would he save his all!

ABIGAIL

[*Frightened, to* DAVID.]

Oh, my lord, I swear to you that Nabal knows not of a single loaf of bread, nor does he suspect that I am with you.

DAVID

I believe you. You need not fear. Joab grumbles because the affair has passed without bloodshed.

[*To* JOAB.]

Go slake your thirst with wine. Have my share, too.

JOAB

[*Going*] And you, with what are you sated?

ASAHEL

[*Following* JOAB] Soon am I, too, quite sated.

[DAVID *looks at* ABIGAIL *intensely.*]

[ABIGAIL *lowers her eyes in embarrassment.*]

DAVID

I have no seat to offer you, no carpet. I sat but now upon this stone. Will you not seat yourself there?

ABIGAIL

Let my lord be seated. His handmaid will stand before him. But you are hungry; what will you have;—that I may serve you?

DAVID

I am sated, since my men have what to eat—and I am sated, since— But be seated, pray, and I shall lie at your feet. Be seated, else I must

stand.—Wait. I will take off my covering and spread it upon the stone—

ABIGAIL

Oh, nay, lord—you need not trouble yourself—I must be journeying back.

DAVID

[*Spreading his covering of hide over the stone*] But—but—you will not journey back straightway. You must wait until your asses have been unburdened, and you, too, must rest yourself. Or am I unwelcome in your eyes, and do you fear me?

ABIGAIL

Oh, my lord. I would merely reach home as quickly as may be, lest Nabal—

DAVID

Recall not Nabal's name to me lest it recall my anger. Come, be seated.

[*Takes her by the hand and seats her down upon the stone. He stretches himself out at her feet and gazes up at her intensely.*]

[ABIGAIL *sits shyly, at a loss, looking about with nervous glances which rest now and then upon* DAVID. *She would look well at him, but dares not.*]

DAVID

[*Breaks at last the oppressive silence, speaking slowly*]
You are called Abigail, then?

ABIGAIL

Yes, my lord.

DAVID

[*Almost to himself, lingering fondly upon the syllables*] A-bi-gail.
[*Pause.*]
Abigail!

ABIGAIL

What, my lord?

DAVID

What a sweet sound has your name!

ABIGAIL

[*Smiling*] I am happy that my name pleases you.

DAVID

Your name and your—

[*Gazes upon her passionately.* ABIGAIL'S *eyelids drooping.*]

DAVID

[*Suddenly*] Tell me, do you love your husband?

[ABIGAIL, *in utter confusion, is about to rise.*]

DAVID

[*Holds her back. Pause.*]
Do you love him?

ABIGAIL

[*At last, in a voice scarcely audible.*]
He is my husband.

DAVID

You said, before, he was an evil person.

ABIGAIL

My parents gave me to him to wife.

DAVID

And you do not love him.—Why should I not indeed, then, punish him? He has earned his death.

ABIGAIL

[*Frightened*] Oh!

DAVID

How now? You love him, then!

ABIGAIL

He is my husband.

DAVID

Ha-ha!

ABIGAIL

And my lord must not deign to heed such enemies.

DAVID

One treads upon a worm.

ABIGAIL

Nay! Do not kill him! Do not kill him!

DAVID

Ha-ha! And now, truly, how did you dare to come to me?

ABIGAIL

I knew that you could forgive your enemies.

DAVID

And what if I should not let you return?

ABIGAIL

[*Jumps up, in terror*] Oh, my lord!

DAVID

Why should Nabal own so precious a jewel? How comes to such a churl so fair a wife?

ABIGAIL

Oh, you will release me!

DAVID

To return to your evil husband?

ABIGAIL

To my husband. Oh, you will not strive against the Lord and disobey his holy mandates?

[DAVID *buries his face in his hands.*]

ABIGAIL

You are the faithful servant of the Lord and will do no violence to the wife of a stranger.

DAVID

[*Arising*] You are right. Depart in peace, then, to your home.

[ABIGAIL *bows very low.*]

DAVID

[*Smiling sadly*] See, I obey you in all things, and treat you honorably.

ABIGAIL

[*Again bowing very low*] Never shall I forget it.

[*They regard each other with sad, wistful countenance. Silence.*]

DAVID

Or forget me, either?

[ABIGAIL'S *head droops, she blushes, and is about to leave. There is a commotion to the left;* ABIGAIL'S *servant runs up to her, followed by* ASAHEL *and others.*]

SERVANT

Oh, mistress! Your husband, Nabal, is drawing near!

ABIGAIL

[*Trembling*] Woe is me!

DAVID

You are under my protection.

ABIGAIL

He must not find me here.

DAVID

So much do you fear him?

ABIGAIL

Nay. For his health I fear, and for his life.

Stout he is, and full-blooded. Should he see me here and learn what I have done with his possessions, it can make him ill, it can kill him.

DAVID

If he comes hither, then he must already have learned it.

ABIGAIL

Oh, where can I conceal myself? Oh, let him not see me and deny me! Hide from his eyes my gift!

DAVID

[*To the servant.*]
How far is Nabal still from here? I see him not yet upon the way.

SERVANT

He is still far off. I ran ahead.

DAVID

[*To* ASAHEL.]
Run through the ranks of our men and bid them stop eating and drinking. Hide all the food, and

conceal Nabal's servants among your ranks, and when Nabal arrives let all lie as if in utmost exhaustion, and let him pass through without harm to a hair of his head.

ASAHEL

Rely upon me. The game will be well played.

[*Leaves together with the* SERVANT *and the others.*]

DAVID

[*To* ABIGAIL.]

Conceal yourself behind the stone. He will not see you.

ABIGAIL

[*Obeying him.*] Oh! Already I descry him. Do you see? That stout one who rides before the retinue.

DAVID

[*Sitting down upon the stone*] He sits not sure upon his mount. I could swear the churl is drunken.

ABIGAIL

And well you may. That is he oft, indeed.

DAVID

[*Bending down toward her*] And he is your husband?

ABIGAIL

By the will of God.

DAVID

And it is for his life you tremble?

ABIGAIL

Always I have shielded his life.

DAVID

You faithful soul!—and, oh, how fair you are!—Hide you not yet. He is still far distant. Let me behold you.—Thus.—Quiet. Be not so afraid.—Quiet. Quiet.—He is still far off.—How fair you are!

ABIGAIL

[*With a sudden cry*] Oh!
[*Tries to hide herself.*]

DAVID

[*Intercepting her*] Nay. Hide you not yet. He is still far off, as you can see. Or would you hide your beauty?

[*Gazes at her intently.* ABIGAIL *hides her face on the stone.*]

DAVID

Abigail, let Nabal die.

ABIGAIL

[*Frightened*] Oh, my lord! Nay!

DAVID

Abigail, look at me.

ABIGAIL

[*Her eyes lowered*] I wish no guilt in his death.—Oh! He draws near! Oh, swear to me that you will harm him not!

DAVID

[*After a long pause*] I swear it.

ABIGAIL

How can I thank you!—He must not find me here!

DAVID

He will not discover you.

ABIGAIL

[*Suddenly*] Oh! He has fallen from the ass! They pulled him down—your men—

DAVID

[*Jumping down from the stone*] It will cost them dear!

[NABAL *enters, scarcely able to stand upon his feet, surrounded by* ASAHEL, ABIATHAR, AHIMELECH *and a few others, who bow before him mockingly.*]

[ABIGAIL *hides quickly behind the stone.*]

NABAL

Beggars! Hungry dogs! Locusts upon the field of strangers!

DAVID

[*To his* MEN, *sternly.*]
Did you pull him down?

ASAHEL

Nay. The lord fell off himself. We approached him and asked for something to still our hunger. He wished to strike us, whereupon he fell. [*Bowing to* NABAL] My lord did not hurt himself? My lord has injured none of his limbs?

ABIATHAR

Woe to the ass that could not carry his master! We will stone him!

DAVID

Let him be!

ASAHEL

We ask but that the lord give us something to eat, else we die of hunger before his very eyes.

NABAL

You should long ago have starved. Naught

shall you receive from me but blows. Away, mongrels! Chew the earth, if you will.

ASAHEL AND THE OTHERS

[*With mock entreaty*] Oh, have mercy!

NABAL

[*Aiming blows at them with his staff*] With my staff—straightway shall you feel Nabal's mercy! Mercy on robbers and thieves! Ha-ha! . . . I'll strike you once, and twice. . . .

[*They run away from him. He pursues them, then turns back to* DAVID.]

And you are David? You are the chief of the beggars? Shall I strike you, too, with my staff? You— Is my wife here with you? I have been told that she went to you with much food. It was all false— I'll have the informants' tongues cut out. They lied to me. They hatched up a false accusation. You are all starving as before. . . . As before, you all beg upon the roads. . . . Hungry dogs! . . . Empty stomachs! . . . But my wife— Where is my wife? She is not at home. . . . I could find her nowhere. . . . Was she not here with you?

Speak, slave, have you not seen my wife? Were I to find her here! . . . I'd strip her naked before your very eyes— You never saw my wife naked? Her body is so sweet to kiss! Ha-ha!

ABIGAIL

[*Behind the stone*] Fie!

NABAL

[*Looking about*] Hey?

[*About to look behind the stone.*]

[DAVID *obstructs his way.*]

Ha-ha! I'd strip her naked right here and let her have it upon her bare body with this staff. . . . I will do so anyway. . . . She was not at home . . . the harlot, the gadabout. . . . On her bare body with staff and thong. . . .

[DAVID *seizes* NABAL *by the throat and commences to choke him.*]

[ASAHEL, ABIATHAR *and* AHIMELECH *rush forward and commence to thrust at* NABAL *with their swords.*]

[ABIGAIL *rises slowly from behind the stone to see why* NABAL *has suddenly become silent. Beholding the struggle, she stifles the outcry which her terror brings to her lips.*]

[DAVID *throws* NABAL *away from him.*]

[ABIGAIL, *her eyes turned toward* NABAL, *sinks slowly behind the stone.*]

[NABAL *falls on the ground his entire length, but soon arises, passing his hand over his face and looking quite sober. Finally his gaze lights upon* DAVID, *and he works himself up to a terrible fit of anger, doubling his fists.*]

You know my wife! . . . She has been here with you! . . . You trailer after married women! You vile lout! You slave, which your master has not whipped enough! . . .

[ASAHEL, ABIATHAR *and* AHIMELECH *rush upon* NABAL *with drawn swords.*]

DAVID

Back! Let not a hair of his head be harmed! I have sworn it! . . .

NABAL

You coward! Night-robber! You runaway slave!

ABIGAIL

[*Jumping up*] Hold! Enough! Cease your contumely!

NABAL

[*With distended eyes*] She is here! . . . She is here with you! . . .

ABIGAIL

[*Steps slowly forth from her hiding place, her eyes lowered.*]

He has earned your thanks, and your blessing, not your rude words.

NABAL

[*Completely sober by now*] She is here, the—

ABIGAIL

Neither abuse me. Call me no names. I am here for your sake. I came hither to save you from his avenging wrath. . . . To save your possessions and the lives of all of us.

NABAL

Did you bring him yourself as gift?

[DAVID *makes a threatening gesture.*]

ABIGAIL

How can you speak thus? Shame on yourself, so to address me!

NABAL

Did you come with empty hands and smooth words to appease him?

ABIGAIL

I brought him gifts.

NABAL

Gifts! Then it is true!

ABIGAIL

Restrain yourself. Your anger is uncalled for.

NABAL

Gifts!

ABIGAIL

Nothing great. An insignificant part of what you have.

NABAL

Gifts! Tell me! Which? What? How much?

ABIGAIL

Two hundred loaves of bread . . .

NABAL

Ttt-two h-hundred loaves! . . . Continue. . . .

ABIGAIL

Two bottles of wine . . .

NABAL

Yes, go on!

ABIGAIL

Five sheep . . .

NABAL

Sheep! . . . Sheep! . . . What else?!

ABIGAIL

Five measures of parched corn . . .

NABAL

Indeed! Five of everything. . . . Five . . . Five . . . Five times five most likely!

ABIGAIL

As true as God lives . . .

NABAL

Continue! Continue! Give the complete tale! What more? How many oxen? How many cattle? How many goats? And milk? And butter?

ABIGAIL

Oh, nay! Oh, nay! Nothing of all these! Only an hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred . . .

NABAL

Ttt-two hundred! . . . What?

ABIGAIL

Cakes of figs.

NABAL

Cakes of figs! Two hundred cakes of figs! Cakes of figs! Cakes of figs! Two hundred! You! . . . You!

[ABIGAIL *tries to shield herself from* NABAL *behind* DAVID.]

NABAL

You! . . .

[*His breath comes short, he gasps, his hands at his throat.*]

[ASAHEL, ABIATHAR AHIMELECH *surround* NABAL *with bread, meat, cakes and wine which they thrust before his eyes.*]

See? *Your* bread it is we eat! . . . Your cakes. . . . Your cakes of figs. . . . Cakes of figs! . . .

[NABAL *falls suddenly to the ground.*]

ABIGAIL

[*With a shriek of fright approaches* NABAL *cautiously.*]

Nabal!

[*He is motionless, and she bends over him.*]

Nabal!

[*She gets down on her knees and looks for signs of life.*]

Nabal!

[*Frightened, looking around to* DAVID.]

He is dead!

DAVID

[*Bending over*] He is dead.

[*As if to himself*]

Blessed be God that has reckoned with my insult from Nabal, and has kept me from evil. Nabal's wickedness has returned upon his own head.

[*To* ABIGAIL]

You, too, may praise the Lord.

ABIGAIL

He is dead.

DAVID

And you are free and delivered from the hand of a wicked man.

ABIGAIL

God is my witness. I did not wish his death.

DAVID

You pure and faithful soul!

ABIGAIL

But he called you such vile names. . . .

[DAVID *puts his hand slowly upon her head, and caresses her hair.*]

[*Shudders and closes her eyes. She soon opens them, and looks upon the corpse.*]

I feel shame that I cannot weep. . . . Yet I can also cry. . . .

DAVID

[*To* ASAHEL *and his comrades.*]

Take him away. Carry him back to his earth in Carmel and bury him there with his forefathers.

AHIMELECH

To the dogs would I . . .

DAVID

Silence! . . .

ASAHEL

Pity the poor dogs! Such a tough morsel! . . .

[*They carry out the corpse.*]

ABIGAIL

[*Arising in tears*] Nabal!

DAVID

You have spoken his name for the last time.

ABIGAIL

[*Shaking her head.*] Nay. He was my husband—

DAVID

Was. But now— I—will—

ABIGAIL

[*Raising her eyes to his*] Would you?

DAVID

—Take his place.

ABIGAIL

Oh!

DAVID

Will you be my wife? If that be true which I have read in your eyes . . .

ABIGAIL

[*Sinks her head, gradually bows low, and falls of a sudden upon her knees.*]
Your handmaid will be a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.

DAVID

[*Raises her, embracing her.*]
My wife! My pious dove!

BATHSHEBA

II. SAMUEL

Chapter XI

2 And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman *was* very beautiful to look upon.

3 And David sent and inquired after the woman. And *one* said, *Is* not this Bath-sheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?

4 And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her. . . .

* * *

14 And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent *it* by the hand of Uriah.

15 And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.

BATHSHEBA

PERSONS

King David
Bathsheba
Uriah the Hittite, her Husband
The Prophet Nathan
A Servant
Guards

SCENE

The roof of the King's *palace. In the right foreground, the* King's *bed, a table upon which are placed wine and goblets. Close by the roof several treetops are visible, some of them on a level with the roof, others reaching higher. Upon the distant horizon may be discerned through a veil of mist the mountains of Judea.*

The King, *in the right background, is leaning against the balustrade at the edge of the roof, his arms pressed against his bosom. Before him stands the prophet* Nathan. Guards *protect the entrance.*

NATHAN

And He will not withhold His mercy from you, as He did from Saul, whom He removed from your path.

DAVID

[*Leans over the balustrade and looks with utmost intentness upon something down among the trees.*]

NATHAN

Your house and your kingdom will endure forever. . . . Your throne will. . . . Are you not listening, my king? What have your eyes beheld there?

DAVID

[*Slowly raises his left hand in a defensive gesture, but remains as if transfixed.*]

NATHAN

[*Looks in the direction of* KING DAVID'S *glances, and suddenly is seized with trembling.*]

A woman at her bath! Look not, my king!

DAVID

[*Without removing his gaze*] How beautiful she is!

NATHAN

My king, you must not look!

DAVID

Who is she,—that glorious woman?

NATHAN

That is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. She is a married woman. You must not behold her in her nakedness. You sin with your eyes.

DAVID

I take the sin upon myself most willingly.

NATHAN

Turn your eyes to me. I have come to you with God's word.

DAVID

But I have beheld God's work. Disturb me not

now, prophet, I would admire the handiwork of the Lord.

NATHAN

King, you utter blasphemy!

DAVID

How glorious she is! Never have I seen such a figure, such a body.

NATHAN

Bethink yourself, my king. Avert your eyes and your thoughts—

DAVID

Shall her husband be richer than I? I must be the first in Judah and Israel.

NATHAN

Already sinful desires are born in your bosom. Close your eyes and—

DAVID

I close my eyes and still I see her. Ho, guards! Be off and fetch me Bathsheba, the daughter of

Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite! She is bathing in the stream below.

NATHAN

[*With an outcry*] King!

DAVID

To the GUARDS.]
Go and do as I have commanded.
[*To* NATHAN.]
And now, you may leave.

NATHAN

Drive not God from your heart!

DAVID

[*Looking over the balustrade, with a wave of his hand.*]
Go now, Nathan, go!

NATHAN

My king!

DAVID

Can you not see that I am impatient?

NATHAN

[*Raising his voice*] My king, hear me out. There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing save one little ewe lamb, which he had brought and nourished up; and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meal, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveler unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.

DAVID

[*Absent-mindedly, without removing his glance*] Fie upon that man! Fie upon him! That man must die!

NATHAN

[*In a voice of thunder*] *You* are that man!

DAVID

[*With a jubilant shout*] They have her! They

have taken her! How frightened she is! How she squirms in their grasp! How quickly she covers herself! Ha, ha, ha! This covering will be easily rent asunder! Ha, ha! . . . They are bringing her! They are coming with her!

[*Turning to* NATHAN.]

Now go! Now go! [*Suddenly recalling something*] Wait, what were you telling me about that man? I believe that I have sentenced myself to death!

NATHAN

And your sentence was just. Hear! Thus saith the Lord God of Israel: "I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul. And I gave thee thy master's house and thy master's wives into thy bosom. . . ."

DAVID

[*Furious*] I will hear no more! I know everything you can tell me, and I know more too. Spare yourself the effort!

NATHAN

Thus spake the Lord: "Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house . . ."

DAVID

Beware lest you bring me to greater sin! Go!

NATHAN

And He will take away thy wives. . . .

DAVID

My sword! My sword! [*Threatening Nathan with doubled fists*] Go!

NATHAN

[*Avoiding him*] So far have you forgotten yourself!

[*Covers his head with his cloak, folds his hands over his head and leaves, with slow steps.*]

DAVID

Ah, at last! Free of him!

[*Sinks upon his bed.*]

Well, why have they not come? Why do I not hear their footsteps yet? Are they crawling there? Have they forgotten how to walk?

[*Listens.*]

Well, well, then! Ah! They are coming! They are coming!

BATHSHEBA

[*She is dragged in by the soldiers. She tears herself free and runs to the middle of the roof. The* GUARDS *disappear at a signal from* DAVID.]

DAVID

[*Looks at* BATHSHEBA *sharply.*]
Ha, ha, ha. Head proudly erect, eyes flashing hatred, not the slightest trace of fear. Oh, glorious woman! . . . Bathsheba, the king burns with desire for you.

BATHSHEBA

I am married.

DAVID

Ha, ha, ha!

BATHSHEBA

And I love my husband.

DAVID

What does that mean?

BATHSHEBA

I will not yield to the king's will.

DAVID

Not yield to my will!

BATHSHEBA

Not yield to your will.

DAVID

To your king?

BATHSHEBA

I bow to my king and kneel before him, but as a woman I belong only to the man I love.

DAVID

Ha! You stir my blood, even as when I fought with the lion and the bear. Woman, you stand now before the eternal conquerer!

BATHSHEBA

You killed when you conquered. And me, too, you can conquer only through death.

DAVID

Such has not been my conquest of women. Daughters of kings have burned with love for me.

BATHSHEBA

I love my husband. My love burns for him alone. For him my bosom heaves with passionate breath. For him my soul dissolves in songs and melodies.

DAVID

You must be mine.

BATHSHEBA

That I never will be.

DAVID

Woman, you forget that you are in my hands.

BATHSHEBA

You are accustomed to having women offer their love to you. You will not employ violence.

DAVID

Shall I teach you to love me? I am impatient. You have ignited a flame in my heart. How may

I win your love at once? Tell me, what virtues has Uriah that I do not possess?

BATHSHEBA

[*Laughing*] Ha, ha!

[*She suddenly realizes what she has done and in fright, raises her hand to her mouth.*]

DAVID

What? Is Uriah, then, so far superior to me?

BATHSHEBA

[*Trembling*] I do not know, my king.

DAVID

Then describe him to me.

BATHSHEBA

I can only sing him to you. Tall is he as a cedar of Lebanon, and like the crown of a tree lies his black hair across his white neck. His eyes are brighter than stars; his face is woven of sunbeams. And young and stalwart is he as Adam in the Garden of Eden.

DAVID

Open your eyes and look upon your king.

BATHSHEBA

I see only Uriah.

DAVID

I resemble him in everything, only that I am no longer so young. Yet I am the king,—I am David.

BATHSHEBA

And were you even an hundredfold more, I would love only Uriah.

DAVID

[*Tapping impatiently with both his fists*] Tell me that no more!

BATHSHEBA

My king, let me go!

DAVID

Let you go? Ha, ha! Come, sit down close beside me. Here is wine! Let us drink. I am

intoxicated enough with your beauty, but I would add to the flames. And you, drink, and fill yourself with fire that will burn out all memory of your Uriah. Come, glorious woman, David, the strong shepherd and the king even more powerful, invites you! Come, sweet woman, the poet and the singer languishes of love for you!

[*He drinks.*]

BATHSHEBA

[*Raises her eyes to heaven and joins her hands in prayer.*]

"The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower. I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised; so shall I be saved from mine enemies . . ."

DAVID

[*Looks at her in wide-eyed astonishment.*]

My own words—*my* prayer—*my* psalm of praise to God—

BATHSHEBA

". . . The sorrows of death compassed me and the flood of ungodly men made me afraid. . . ."

DAVID

Cease, woman, cease! This will not avail you. You are trying to recall the Lord to me and the gratitude I owe Him. That will not help you. I am ready to break His word, His commandment, His law. I am mad with desire for you. Let Him punish me, let His hand lie heavy and strong upon my head, I must have you! My blood boils within me, I recognize no power above me now. Come, you glorious woman, come to my arms. King David has broken with his God for love of you. Tremble not. Be proud! Cry out in jubilation!

[*He advances toward her.*]

BATHSHEBA

Uriah! Uriah!

URIAH

[*Enters. Immediately comprehending the situation, he trembles as if struck by a thunder-*

bolt. Meeting the KING'S *glance, however, he falls on his knees before* DAVID.]

BATHSHEBA

[*Looks around, sees* URIAH *upon his knees, recognizes him and shouts with joy.*]
Oh, Uriah! My Uriah! My beloved! My deliverer!

DAVID

Is that Uriah? Arise.
[*Seizes his sword.*]

URIAH

[*Arises.*]

BATHSHEBA

[*Embraces* URIAH, *seeking protection.*]

URIAH

[*Frees himself from his wife's arms, and stands motionless before the* KING.]

DAVID

[*In harsh reproval, to* URIAH.]

Who called you hither? What brings you to me?

URIAH

Nathan told me to hasten up to you,—that you wished to see me.

DAVID

May your blood be upon his head.

URIAH

What does my king want of me?

DAVID

What do I want of you? What do I— Oh, yes. Wait here. I have a mission for you.

URIAH

Your vassal will perform it faithfully.

DAVID

[*Looks at him sharply and laughs.*]
He is nothing but a worm.
[*He leaves.*]

BATHSHEBA

[*Falls upon her husband in fright and in tears.*]
Uriah!

URIAH

[*Stands motionless.*]

BATHSHEBA

You are angry with me. Your heart is turned to stone against me. You do not want to look upon me. But I have not sinned,—neither against God nor against you, Uriah. I did not come hither willingly. Uriah, do you hear me? The king's will brought me here. He beheld me while I was bathing, and his soldiers drove me, dragged me here. Yet I resisted him and the king has not yet touched me. I spoke to him about my love of you, and called upon God and upon you. And you came at the moment of my direst need. Uriah! Believe me, I speak the truth. Uriah! Why do you stand like that? Uriah! Look at me! Uriah! Save me and yourself!

URIAH

The king wants you! The king's wish will be fulfilled!

BATHSHEBA

[*With an outcry.*] Uriah!!—You cannot mean that. Come to yourself. Awake! You are strong and sturdy. You must help me and yourself.

URIAH

Against the king?

BATHSHEBA

Slay the king!

URIAH

Bathsheba!

BATHSHEBA

You have your sword with you. Punish him.

URIAH

The king?

BATHSHEBA

The criminal! The man who would violate your wife! The man who would sully your name! The sinner against God! Ah, how could you have refrained from punishing him just now? How could you fall upon your knees before him?

URIAH

He is my king!

BATHSHEBA

Uriah! How can you speak like that? Are you, then, not man enough? The king wants to steal my love away from you— Does my love mean nothing to you? Do you love me no longer? Uriah, tell me, can I have lost your love?

URIAH

I love you, Bathsheba.

BATHSHEBA

You love me, and yet—you yield me to the king without a struggle?

URIAH

I cannot oppose my king. [*In frantic outburst*] Oh, were it but another, another man, even a stalwart of the king. My fingers would clutch at his throat like heavy ropes until the breath of life should be crushed out of him. He should be transformed into a pillar, and with the iron of my fists I would drive him into the ground. No one ever would have died such a death as the transgressor in the mighty hands of Uriah the Hittite, and men would long wonder at their strength . . . were it but another.

BATHSHEBA

Do you fear the king? Are you afraid of his strength? Do you feel weaker than he?

URIAH

Never shall my hand be raised against my king.

BATHSHEBA

Uriah! Uriah! Hear me! Only a moment ago I recalled to your lust-smitten king the name of God. His own prayer, which he sang when he was delivered from the hands of Saul, I sent up

to God. Yet he did not restrain his lust, and openly defied God and God's commandments. Uriah! Uriah! The king, in his sinful lust, forgot all fear of God; then cannot your honorable love incite you against the king?

URIAH

I cannot, Bathsheba!

BATHSHEBA

In the name of our great love, Uriah!

URIAH

I cannot, Bathsheba.

BATHSHEBA

If you cannot punish the sinner against you and your wife, then punish the sinner against God!

URIAH

[*Stands motionless.*]

BATHSHEBA

In the name of God, Uriah! Nathan sent you here to punish the blasphemer and adulterer.

URIAH

[*Silent.*]

BATHSHEBA

Are you, perhaps, afraid of death? Uriah, I will die together with you. Rather will I die than survive my shame. Take your sword and stab me. How sweet to me will death be from your hand! Will you die together with me? Then death will be a dance to me! Why do you stand like that? Why have you turned to stone? Uriah, I will die with you!

URIAH

My king needs me.

BATHSHEBA

What! Uriah! Uriah! Speak no more like that! You will slay the very soul within me! You will kill the love within me! Has the king so robbed you of your will? Are you so much a slave? Uriah, you were my pride, and my whole being was jubilant with the pride of loving you and possessing your love in return. Shall that love now be exterminated in me? I shall become

a worm, Uriah! I shall scorn myself, Uriah! Uriah! Uriah, my soul flutters up to you in trembling! Help yourself and me! Help yourself and me in our doubly great necessity— You are silent, Uriah, you . . .

A Servant

[*Enters with a script in his hand and gives it to* Uriah.]

The king sends you with this to Joab, at war, and bids you depart at once.

[*Leaves.*]

Uriah

[*Takes the script, conceals it in his clothes and prepares to go. He speaks with a quivering, tearful voice.*]

Dwell in peace; farewell, Bathsheba!

Bathsheba

You are going?! You depart and leave me behind in the hands of the seducer! Is that how you love me?

Uriah

I cannot do else, Bathsheba.

BATHSHEBA

You cannot do else!

URIAH

I can die only one death—for my king.

BATHSHEBA

Am I nothing to you? Is the king so much dearer to you than I? Do you know where the king is sending you to?

URIAH

To Joab, who is now besieging the city of Rabbah.

BATHSHEBA

Do you know why he is sending you thither?

URIAH

That is not for me to know; neither do I care to know.

BATHSHEBA

He is sending you to your death! He wants to get you out of his way! He wants to crush you

like a worm! Can you not see that? Can you not grasp that for yourself?

URIAH

I am going upon the king's mission. Do not stand in my way.

BATHSHEBA

[*Struggling with him*] Uriah! Uriah! You shall not go! You shall not leave me alone!

[*Tears the script from him.*]

URIAH

How dare you! Give me back that message!

BATHSHEBA

[*Runs behind the bed, breaks open the royal seal, and, evading* URIAH, *reads breathlessly.*] "Set you Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire you from him, that he may be smitten, and die." Uriah!

URIAH

[*Stands pale and trembling, breathing hard.*]

BATHSHEBA

Did you hear? Uriah, you are going to your doom! Is it not better far to die here together with me? Courage, Uriah! Courage! Rouse your fury! Become my champion once again!

URIAH

[*Furiously*] Give me that message!

BATHSHEBA

What? Against me? Do you rouse yourself to fury against me? Oh!

[*Tears the script to bits.*]

URIAH

Bathsheba!

BATHSHEBA

[*Throwing the bits of parchment into his face*] Now go! Now go and fulfil the king's mission.

URIAH

[*Gathering the pieces*] I know the message by heart, too. I go to the war to die for my king,

and dearly shall the Ammonites pay for my death!

[*He leaves.*]

BATHSHEBA

Uriah! He is going! He is gone! [*Wildly exicted*] I spit upon you! I send after you my venomous scorn! I hate you! You dead worm! Fie! To think that I loved such a man! Out, out of my heart, out of my soul! Out! Out! I will tear the heart out of me that sheltered a love for him! I will bite away my lips that kissed him. Ah! And David would compare himself with *him*, and comes out second in my eyes! Ha, ha, ha! . . . I laugh at myself; I mock myself! I loved a slave, ha, ha, ha! Now I must go to the king! He must cleanse me of my impurity! He must sanctify me! Ah-h-h! I have loved a slave! Now I shall love a king!

[*Turns to the steps that lead down into the palace.*]

DAVID

[*Stands at the entrance, with open arms, meeting her triumphantly.*]

IN THE HAREM

II. SAMUEL

Chapter XX

3 And David came to his house at Jerusalem; and the king took the ten women *his* concubines, whom he had left to keep the house, and put them in ward, and fed them, but went not in unto them. So they were shut up unto the day of their death, living in widowhood.

IN THE HAREM

PERSONS

King David

Michal
Bathsheba
Abigail
Ahinoam
Maacah
Haggith
Abital
Eglah
Bathshua
Nine Others
} His Wives

Ten Concubines of David
Hushai
A Servant

SCENE

The great hall of the harem. To the left, under a canopy, David's *throne, which is approached by a carpeted staircase. On both sides of the throne, making a semi-circle about it, divans for*

the KING'S *wives. Opposite, a carpeted platform for the concubines. The walls are hung with rich cloths. At the right background a curtain is parted, and there enter in single file* DAVID'S *ten concubines, whom* DAVID *had left to guard the palace and who were violated by* ABSALOM. *Their faces are covered with sorrow, their heads are bowed; some of them are weeping. They advance upon the platform, sink to their knees and remain in expectant posture, facing the throne. Soon there enter* KING DAVID'S *wives, likewise in single file, led by* MICHAL, BATHSHEBA *and* ABIGAIL. *There are eighteen in all. They take their places upon the divans to the right and left of the throne, in the following arrangement: To the right,* MICHAL, ABIGAIL, MAACAH, ABITAL, BATHSHUA *and four others; to the left,* BATHSHEBA, AHINOAM, HAGGITH, EGLAH *and five others.* AHINOAM, *the mother of* AMNON, *who has been slain by* ABSALOM, *and* MAACAH, *the mother of* ABSALOM, *are garbed in black.*

ABIGAIL

Sister Maacah, and you, sister Ahinoam, why have you come garbed in black?

MAACAH

And *you* ask?

AHINOAM

Never can I forget my departed son.

ABIGAIL

But our husband the King wants to celebrate our return to Jerusalem, and will wish to see no sorrow about him.

MAACAH

His joy is my sorrow. I cannot rejoice at the return. It cost me my son, my Absalom.

AHINOAM

And my wounds, too, it opens afresh. I seem to behold my Amnon before my very eyes.

MAACAH

[*With bitter laughter*] As if he were worth mourning for!

AHINOAM

He? He was King David's first-born son and was no pretender to his father's throne!

MAACAH

The violator of my daughter!

AHINOAM

He did that in a tumult of passion, intoxicated by your daughter's beauty. He had it in his blood from his royal father. But what my son's murderer, your Absalom, was able to do in cold blood, incited by a thirst for vengeance and a spirit of rebellion, is shown without your testimony by these ten sorrowful figures.

[*The concubines huddle closer together.*] When my son—

MAACAH

Your son is the cause of all our sorrows. An outcast he was, and like an outcast lived and died.

AHINOAM

[*Arising, sternly*] You shall not call my dead son, the King's first-born, an outcast! Do you hear!

MAACAH

He destroyed both my children. My Tamar drags out a weary existence and my Absalom—my Absalom—

AHINOAM

[*Sitting down*] He brought his death upon himself,—the rebel against his father and his King. His name will be cursed forever.

MAACAH

[*Springs to her feet*] What did you say?

ABIGAIL

Peace, sisters! The King may enter at any moment. Let the dead slumber peacefully in their graves. You cannot alter the past. The hand of the Lord was in it, too. And I tell you that you should not have come here in mourning.

MAACAH

[*Sitting down*] My Absalom! My Absalom! My son! My only child! And *his* name will be cursed forever!! He was the handsomest

youth in all Israel, and had no peer in manly beauty. From head to foot he had not a single blemish, and every limb of his was a hymn of praise to God. His head of hair,—when was ever the like of it beheld? When it was shorn it weighed, according to the royal measure, two hundred shekels. And he is dead!

AHINOAM

How, then, shall I bewail my Amnon? Had he lived, as first-born son he would have inherited the throne and would have become king over Judah and Israel.

BATHSHEBA

[*Laughing*] Ha, ha!

MAACAH

My Absalom was king even during the King's life.

AHINOAM

The pretender, the rebel! Boast of that before the King, when he comes.

HAGGITH

[*To* BATHSHEBA.]
You just laughed, sister Bathsheba.—What is the meaning of that laughter? May I know?

BATHSHEBA

Oh, it was just a passing thought.

HAGGITH

You hide those thoughts of yours in vain. I know them.

BATHSHEBA

Then why do you ask me, sister Haggith?

HAGGITH

You think your Solomon will become king.

BATHSHEBA

I think what I think.

HAGGITH

Make no mistake, however. My Adonijah is now the nearest heir to the throne.

ABIGAIL

You have forgotten my Chileab altogether, sister Haggith. After Amnon he is the oldest. But why need you quarrel already? The king still lives. And know this: The man of his own choice will be king after him.

BATHSHEBA

That is what I think.

HAGGITH

My Adonijah is no less handsome than Absalom, and after Absalom he is entitled to the throne.

ABITAL

If the crown falls to the most handsome, then my Shephatiah must become king.

EGLAH

In that case, the crown belongs to my Ithream.

MICHAL

[*Sadly*] Ha, ha, how they quarrel over my father's kingdom, and I, the barren woman, can have no word in the matter. Ha ha! . . .

[*To the other wives.*]
Why are you silent? You, too, have sons, and handsome ones, too.

[*To a wife seated near* ABITAL.]
Bathshua, you: Shimeah must be king!

[*To the one next to* BATHSHUA.]
And you, advance the claims of your Idhar!

[*To a third.*]
And you: certainly your Elishua should grace the throne!

[*Turns to the left.*]
And why not Nepheg or Japhia? Elishama? Eliada? Eliphalet? Stand up, mothers, for the rights of your sons! Each of you is equally the wife of the king, and your sons are the sons of the king, the offspring of David's loins! Ha ha!

BATHSHUA

Naturally, if Haggith puts forth her Adonijah. . . .

HAGGITH

[*With proud scorn*]. Your sons are but slaves of my Adonijah.

THE WIVES

[*With the exception of* MICHAL, BATHSHEBA, ABIGAIL, AHINOAM *and* MAACAH, *they spring to their feet and advance toward* HAGGITH *with loud cries.*]

Slaves! . . . The king's sons! The impudence! She is mad! She talks like a market woman! The king must know of this!

ABIGAIL

[*Arises and tries to quiet the women and separate them.*]

Quiet, my sisters! Calm yourselves!

[DAVID *enters from the background, through a parted curtain. He stands still and contemplates the group of shrieking women.*]

[*The* CONCUBINES *notice him and prostrate themselves before him. There is a sudden hush. The wives have become aware of the* KING'S *presence. Each steps back quickly to her place, sinks down upon her knees and prostrates herself before the* KING. MICHAL *and* BATHSHEBA, *however, remain standing, bowing very low.*]

DAVID

[*Advancing with slow steps*] Arise! Be seated!

[*The wives arise and go to their seats. The women of the quarreling group walk in embarrassment, ill at ease, their heads bowed down.*]

[*The* CONCUBINES *remain upon their knees.*]

DAVID

[*Walks up to his throne, sits down and contemplates his wives.*]

Is this how you awaited my coming? Is this the reception you give me? What was the shrieking about? What is it that I must know? —Tell me, Michal!

MICHAL

[*Proudly*] You did not hear my voice. I was not among the shriekers.

HAGGITH

No. She merely incited us to shriek.

DAVID

[*To* HAGGITH.]

I did not ask you to speak.

[*To* ABIGAIL.]
Will you not tell me what the clamor was about?

ABIGAIL

Oh, King, all is quiet now. You, too, forget the shouting and let us rejoice at our return to our home.

DAVID

But I am inquisitive. Shall I not satisfy my curiosity? Shall I not know what it behooves me to know?

ABIGAIL

Oh, King!

DAVID

You tell me, then, Bathsheba.

BATHSHEBA

It was all folly, my King. A foolish word was spoken. You need take no offense.

DAVID

The beginning is very interesting. Now I am more curious than ever. Was I the reason for

the shouting? Was the foolish word spoken about me?

[*A stir of protest from* BATHSHEBA, ABIGAIL *and several others.*]

Speak on, Bathsheba. You made a splendid beginning.

BATHSHEBA

I was not among the shriekers, either . . .

DAVID

[*Impatiently*] Come now! Come now! Abital, I heard your voice in the brawl distinctly. Tell me, what is it that I must know?

ABITAL

Haggith called our sons the slaves of her Adonijah.

DAVID

That is an insult. Most certainly. How come you, Haggith, to speak such a thing? Are not their sons my sons? Are they less to me than Adonijah?

HAGGITH

To me he is much more.

EGLAH

She sees in him the heir to your throne.

DAVID

So?—So. Now I know all. Now I see the whole thing clearly. You behold me already dead—

THE WIVES

Oh, no!

DAVID

—And whenever you come together, you divide my legacy among you.

ABIGAIL

You need not wax bitter, my King. This is the first time . . .

DAVID

Silence, Abigail. Make no apologies for anybody or anything. Silence, my dove, it is I who speak now.

[*Looks upon his wives with a bitter smile on his lips.*]

Mothers!—I behold before me only aged mothers. Where are my wives? Mothers! Mothers! What are you to me? What am I to you? I came to you and forgot your years. And suddenly—so much old age! Such icy cold! Are you really the beauties who gave me such joy and made my heart beat faster? Michal, how you look! So old, and turned to stone.

MICHAL

I wish that already I were dead. Then should I be free from my debasement.

DAVID

Your debasement?

MICHAL

Yes. That of playing so small a part in David's life.

DAVID

And once you wanted to be my all.

MICHAL

Michal, the daughter of King Saul, did not wish to share her love even with God.

DAVID

Yes, yes.—Yet you went to Phalti, the son of Laish of Gallim.

MICHAL

[*Angrily*] You know yourself that my father gave me away to him! And moreover—

DAVID

Moreover?

MICHAL

—You had already taken two others.
[*Indicating* ABIGAIL *and* AHINOAM.]

DAVID

Each of them a wonderful beauty. How could I let them pass me by?

MICHAL

It pleases you to be witty. That is your answer to me. And yet you wonder that I can feel nothing toward you but—

DAVID

Scorn? Speak your mind freely.

[MICHAL *turns her head away.*]

DAVID

Ha, ha! And she expected me to sacrifice so much beauty for her sake! Ah, how great my loss would have been! Every one of you was to me the beginning of a new life; every new love was a new springtime, full of joy and song. Do you remember, Abigail? With the first glance upon you I lost my heart. Your very name entranced me, and from your eyes shot beams like chains of fire that drew me to you and held me fettered. I could not tear myself free and—did not want to. God brought you and me together. How could Michal stand between us? And how beautiful were you, Ahinoam,—the fairest flower in all Israel. Could I leave you unplucked? It would have been a sin. And you, Maacah, princess of wondrous beauty—you gave me, too, my most beautiful son.

MAACAH

[*Bursts into tears.*]

DAVID

Weep not, weep not. Your son has been mourned aplenty. Why did you come here in mourning? You, too, Ahinoam, wherefore that old mourning garb? Old clothes make you look still older. Oh, Mothers! Mothers! You, too, Bathsheba, flower of my passion, are now only a mother.

BATHSHEBA

And grandmother, too, with many grandchildren. But let me tell you: neither have you grown younger.

DAVID

Ha, ha . . . I am gray, quite gray. A gray beard, a gray head, and a wrinkled face. Oh, yes. I am no longer the young David, the blond champion. [*Stands up*] Yet!

[*Draws himself to full length, throws out his chest and descends the steps with firm gait. With lithe, youthful motions he approaches his wives.*]

Yet—I am still a man! The gray hair upon my head has not yet turned to ice and snow. I am

not yet frozen to stone. My heart and blood still burn with a seething flame and hot desires still surge within me.

MICHAL

Let us rejoice! King David will take unto himself new wives!

DAVID

You speak truly. In this last year I have not grown younger. I begin to feel it. Absalom cost me much, ah— An enemy from my own house, just as the prophet foretold. That is the price I paid for you, Bathsheba.

BATHSHEBA

Was I not worth it?

DAVID

Ha, ha, ha! You *are*, you *are* worth it! . . . Ah, I thank you all for the great joys you have given me; and I thank God, too, that he strewed you upon my path—a glorious bouquet of flowers. Yet,—yet, like even the most beautiful of flowers, already you have withered. But I have remained the plucker. Gray-haired and with wrinkled

cheek,—yet still a plucker of flowers. Ah, I am still a man and want passion and fire about me. I want to spend my virility in passionate pleasures. My young concubines, I invite you to the dance.

[*He runs back to his throne, remains standing before it, and claps his palms as a signal for a* SERVANT.]

[A SERVANT *enters through the curtain in the background and prostrates himself before the* KING.]

DAVID

I want music,—lively music for the dance,—wild, fiery, voluptuous. I want to see a wild and fiery dance.

[*The* SERVANT *arises and bows himself out through the curtain, facing the* KING.]

[*The* CONCUBINES *have meanwhile arisen, but they are plainly astonished at the* KING'S *invitation and stand at a loss. From behind the curtain come the strains of a wild dance.*]

DAVID

[*To the* CONCUBINES.]
Well, then? Why the delay? Dance, I say!

THE CONCUBINES

Oh, King!

DAVID

Dance, when I command it!

[*The* CONCUBINES *go down from the platform and begin to dance. At first they seem undecided, but gradually they forget themselves and dance with savage abandon.*]

DAVID

[*With hungry glance he follows the dance and the movements of the women's bodies. Suddenly he springs to his feet.*]

Enough! Enough! Everything whirls before my eyes! Go! Absalom has shamed you and you are dead to me! Go! You have danced before your King for the last time!

[*The* CONCUBINES *prostrate themselves before* DAVID.]

DAVID

I shall miss you sorely, young wives. But it must be. You shall have a home all your own, and never again shall you see me. Go,—widows, go!

[*The* Concubines *go out at the right, with subdued weeping.*]

David

I shall miss them, the dear young wives! What an array of splendor!—Yes.—Well, now I am alone with you. Who of you still glows with youth? Who of you will dazzle your husband's eyes with your beauty?—No! No! Go! I want to be alone now.

[*The wives bow deeply; they begin to leave. They go in reverse order to that in which they entered.*]

Michal

[*The last. She remains standing for a moment at the curtain, looks at* David, *shakes her head, utters a mocking laugh and leaves.*]

David

[*For a while he sits huddled in his throne. He looks much older. Soon he claps his palms together.*]

[*The* Servant *enters and prostrates himself before the* King.]

DAVID

Send Hushai in to me.

[*The* SERVANT *arises and bows himself out, facing the* KING.]

[DAVID *goes down from his throne and begins to pace up and down the room, as if he were cold.*]

HUSHAI

[*Enters from the rear, bowing low.*]
Did you desire something, my King?

DAVID

Hushai, I am cold.

HUSHAI

[*With a merry smile on his lips and in his eyes, he slowly raises his hand to his beard.*]

ABISHAG

I. KINGS

Chapter I

1 Now king David was old *and* stricken in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he gat no heat.

2 Wherefore his servants said unto him, Let there be sought for my lord the king a young virgin: and let her stand before the king, and let her cherish him, and let her lie in thy bosom, that my lord the king may get heat.

3 So they sought for a fair damsel throughout all the coasts of Israel, and found Abishag a Shunammite, and brought her to the king.

4 And the damsel *was* very fair, and cherished the king, and ministered to him; but the king knew her not.

ABISHAG

PERSONS

King David
Abishag
Hushai the Archite
Jehoida
A Servant
Guards, Servants

SCENE

King David's *sleeping chamber. Night. The chamber is illuminated by numerous lights. The* King, *covered with many clothes, is seated upon a great chair before a table laden with food and drink. His eyes are closed, as if he were sleeping. Before him stands* Hushai *the Archite. At the door and behind the* King's *chair stand* Servants.

David

[*Opening his eyes at last and looking at* Hushai. *The* King *is weary, spent and sad.*]

HUSHAI

[*Bowing*] What does my king desire?

DAVID

Not here yet? Has none of them been found? Is there no woman that can bring me warmth?

HUSHAI

None of the messengers has yet returned.

DAVID

King David lives now only in the songs of maidens. Only in words and in songs am I still a hero and a champion. "He maketh my feet like hinds' feet and setteth me upon my high places. He teacheth my hands to war, so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms. Thou hast enlarged my steps under me, that my feet did not slip." The song sounds well, yet will no woman nestle in my bosom, shunning it as if it were the bosom of a corpse.

HUSHAI

I ordered them to find the most beautiful woman, and that takes time.

DAVID

Ha, ha,—the most beautiful—

HUSHAI

So that you will be all the better warmed.

DAVID

Yes . . . yes. . . . Your counsel, Archite, was good, and wise was your thought, but before . . . before your most beautiful woman is found I shall freeze.

HUSHAI

Let the thought of her warm you until she comes.

DAVID

Yes . . . yes . . . The thought . . . of the most beautiful . . .

HUSHAI

Of the most beautiful woman within the boundaries of Israel.

DAVID

Why not, then, the most beautiful in the world?

HUSHAI

That would not have been wise of me.

DAVID

Not wise of you?

HUSHAI

Whom should I seek when the most beautiful woman of all had ceased to warm the King?

DAVID

Ha, ha! Wise Hushai!

HUSHAI

Let her but be one of the most beautiful, and we may well be at ease.

DAVID

Until at last the most beautiful of all . . .

HUSHAI

You shall never have her.

DAVID

What!

HUSHAI

With *her* I shall only excite your passion. The excitement will keep you warm and spur on your desires.

DAVID

And am I to die without having enjoyed the most beautiful woman of all?

HUSHAI

What will your life be worth to you if you will have already enjoyed the most beautiful woman?

DAVID

Yes, yes. You speak truth, my faithful Hushai. Yet not wisely; he-he, not wisely. Can you not understand that I shall never believe you when you tell me I have already had the most beautiful? I shall think to myself that somewhere dwells the most beautiful woman of all, and that your messengers have not yet found her. I shall think that the most beautiful woman has only just been born, and that when she will ripen to womanhood I shall no longer be alive. You see, you may bring the most beauteous woman to me

in all confidence. I shall admire her and begin to long for one even more beautiful.

HUSHAI

Let each one be in your eyes the most beautiful.

DAVID

How you squirm out of it, you wily Hushai!—But up to the present you have not even one. I fear that they will not come to the old, cold king. They have gone into hiding, your superlative beauties, as if from a great affliction, a grave misfortune.—You . . . if your messengers return empty-handed, as they left, I will punish you. And I pronounce your sentence even now. Know it, then: if your messengers return without one who shall warm me, go, like your opponent Achitophel, and choke yourself with a bone.

HUSHAI

I know that my messengers will fulfil their mission rightly. But out of foresight I swear upon this spot that henceforth not a piece of meat shall cross my lips.

DAVID

Ha, ha!—How came you to your counsel? Why did you not seek out some war for me in which I could have warmed myself? I would have pursued my enemies and annihilated them. I would not have returned until I had exterminated them. I would have wiped them out, and left not a trace of them, so that they never again could rise against me. They would have to fall under my feet. Why did you not seek to strengthen me through a war? To renew the vigor of my veins in battle?

HUSHAI

Peace reigns between you and all the surrounding tribes, upon whom has descended the terror of your might. Judah and Israel dwell in peace upon their soil. Would I not sin against God and man if I urged you to a war? And moreover —have you not for a long time sent forth to war only your generals, yourself remaining behind?

DAVID

Why did you not seek to warm me with God's word? The Lord has ever been my light; the

Lord has ever illuminated my darkness. He has been my strength; his word has always been the very breath of my life. Why did you not seek warmth for me from Him, from Him who has always comforted and warmed me?

HUSHAI

The Lord has never abandoned you and you have always carried His word within you, yet did you grow chill and your limbs tremble with cold. And had you really wanted to find warmth in God's word, you would have summoned the prophets Gad and Nathan, not me.

DAVID

You are a go-between. Your heart yearns for women and they are ever in your thoughts.

HUSHAI

I am the proper healer for your weakness. The man in David is old and cold; the man in David must be restored to youth and heat.

DAVID

Then fetch me the remedy at once.

HUSHAI

Patience, my King!

DAVID

Patience! And my days perhaps are numbered. Death lurks at my shoulder. I do not want to die of old age's weakness!

A SERVANT

[*Enters and prostrates himself before the* KING.]

DAVID

What is it? What tidings do you bring?

THE SERVANT

Jehoida has come.

HUSHAI

Jehoida!

THE SERVANT

And brought with him—

HUSHAI

[*Hastening to the door*] The remedy, young and beautiful!

DAVID

Stay, Hushai! Do not yet bring her in. Remove these garments and coverings from me.

[*With the aid of his* SERVANTS, *he extricates himself from his numerous coverings, and stands up.*]

I want to move freely, and liberate my limbs from their stiffness. I would not have her take fright at my aged appearance, nor have the blood turn to ice in her veins on beholding my impotency. Adorn me in royal apparel.

[*The* SERVANTS *hasten to do his bidding.*]

Let her be greeted by a king. And let her see that I am still vigorous, that I am no corpse that belongs under the ground.

[*The* SERVANTS, *who have brought his regal apparel, begin to dress him.*]

King David needs but to make partnership with youth, and he is again the David of yore, full of warmth and life, full of strength and song. Go, summon Jehoida alone.

THE SERVANT

[*Goes out, bowing and facing the* KING.]

DAVID

I want to question him. Before I see her I want to imagine how she looks, and in this he can help me. I want to know whether the reality can surpass my fancy. I want to see whether my power of imagination has weakened with the years.

JEHOIDA

[*Enters, and prostrates himself before the* KING.]

DAVID

Arise, Jehoida, and tell me what you have brought me. How does she look? How is she built? In what does her beauty consist?

JEHOIDA

[*Who has arisen, falls again prostrate before the* KING.]

DAVID

Arise and remain standing, I told you. Speak, and reveal the priceless worth of the treasure you have sought out for me.

JEHOIDA

Oh, King, I can find no words!

DAVID

I tell you, describe her to me!

JEHOIDA

I crave your pardon, my King! Your slave does not wish to utter blasphemy.

DAVID

Hushai, go and look upon her, and bring me back word of her.

HUSHAI

My own curiosity has been roused to the highest pitch.

[*Goes to the door.*]

JEHOIDA

[*To* HUSHAI, *as he leaves.*]

Ah, Hushai, you go to gaze upon the sun. Shield your eyes.

DAVID

Yet you have not gone blind.

JEHOIDA

But never again shall I be able to look upon my own wife.

DAVID

You rouse a powerful curiosity in me. Where did you find her?

JEHOIDA

In Shunam.

DAVID

What is she called?

JEHOIDA

Abishag is her name.

DAVID

Young?

JEHOIDA

Spring itself was never so young.

DAVID

Her lips?

JEHOIDA

If you will be able to tear your lips away from them, then you will know that you are really old.

DAVID

Tall? Short?

JEHOIDA

Oh, ask me not, my King! I believe that she is tall enough to blot out from your sight the rest of the world, and small enough for you to lift in your arms with a prayer of thanks to God that you have lived to behold her.

DAVID

What has become of Hushai?

JEHOIDA

Hold it not against him, my King, if he cannot tear himself away from her.

DAVID

I'll have his eyes—

HUSHAI

[*Enters, preceded by* ABISHAG.]

DAVID

[*His anger suddenly subsides, as if he has been amazed and dazzled by the sight of* ABISHAG.]

ABISHAG

[*About to prostrate herself.*]

HUSHAI

[*Restrains her.*]
Pardon me, my King, if I have brought her before you without your bidding. I did not want you to hold up the poverty of my speech as a mockery for small children.

JEHOIDA

Now, my King, you can see!

DAVID

[*After a pause, as if awakened from his astonishment.*]

Now—I—see.

JEHOIDA

Did my silence exaggerate her beauty?

DAVID

I did not know that my kingdom was so rich.

JEHOIDA

During my whole journey back I sought words to clothe my admiration, but—

HUSHAI

Enough! We shall leave the king alone to wonder at her. He will find the proper words,—the words pregnant with beauty and ecstasy. Perhaps he will be inspired with a new song, a new psalm of praise. Go, Jehoida, you have fulfilled your duty wonderfully well.

JEHOIDA

The Lord pointed out the way and guided my steps.

HUSHAI

And the king will reward you most royally for God's grace.

JEHOIDA

[*Prostrates himself before the* KING.]
Blessings upon you, my King!
[*Arises, and leaves, facing the* KING *as he does so.*]

HUSHAI

[*To the* SERVANTS.]
You go, too, and stand guard over the entrance.

THE SERVANTS

[*Prostrate themselves, arise and leave.*]

HUSHAI

And now I, too, my king, shall wish you good night. I hope that my wish will be fulfilled and that the night will be good to you.
[*To* ABISHAG.]
You know, most beautiful woman, what has brought you hither—

DAVID

[*As if suddenly awakened from a trance, impatiently.*]

Go, Hushai! Your tongue grows longer and longer, and you proceed from one folly to another still worse. Go, in peace!

HUSHAI

[*Bowing*] I crave your pardon, my King. Good night to you, and peace to you, and peace to her who is with you.

[*He leaves.*]

DAVID

[*Looks upon* ABISHAG *as before, and approaches her.*]

ABISHAG

[*Sinks slowly to her knees and raises her hands as if in prayer. She seems wrapt in thought, and her lips move.*]

DAVID

[*Amazed*] You are praying, Abishag! You are kneeling in prayer!

ABISHAG

I am thanking the Lord that He has brought me to behold you with my own eyes!

DAVID

Truly? Does it make you so happy?

ABISHAG

Oh, King, need you ask that?

DAVID

[*Lifts her up.*]

Come, arise and sit down beside me, and tell me why it causes you so much rejoicing.

[*Embraces her and leads her to his chair. He sits down and places her at his feet, pressing her close to his knees. He takes her head between his hands, bends it back and looks deep into her eyes.*]

Well, tell me. Why your great rejoicing?

ABISHAG

Who, then, would not rejoice to behold King David?

DAVID

[*Releasing her head.*] How good to hear! But I want to know why *you* are so glad to see me.

ABISHAG

From the earliest days of childhood I have grown up with your name in my ears, and your deeds filled my soul with wonder. No sooner had I learned to say "father, mother," than I could already stammer "King David," too. And I was taught to love and fear you even as the Lord Himself.

DAVID

To fear me?

ABISHAG

And to love you.

DAVID

And which did you most?

ABISHAG

Love.

DAVID

Little flatterer, you are not telling—the truth.

ABISHAG

I speak the truth, my King. You were my hero, you were my champion. At the dance I sang much about your conquests, and at play I told the tale of your loves. To your foes I was the greatest enemy; your persecutors first taught me how to curse. I wept at your sorrows, but at your triumphs I thrilled with jubilation. And more loudly, more joyfully, more soulfully than any other did I cry, "David, king of Israel, may he live forever!"

DAVID

[*For a while he caresses her head.*]
How did you picture me to yourself?

ABISHAG

Just as you are. . . . As I see you now.

DAVID

With a long, gray beard and long, gray eyebrows?

ABISHAG

My father saw you some years ago, and at that time, with pride and joy, he described you to his family and his friends. They heard the account of your glory and beauty with open-mouthed wonder and envied him the good fortune of having beheld you. And from his words I retained an image of you in my memory, and it remained there as vivid as life.

DAVID

With my white hair, with the wrinkles in my cheek, old and cold—

ABISHAG

Old and cold?!

DAVID

And the burden of seventy years upon my shoulders?

ABISHAG

Who counts King David's years? King David is—King David! There is no braver man in all Israel and there is no younger. Thirty great

heroes does David count in his host, yet none can approach him. His feet are like hinds' feet, and set him upon his high places. His hands are skilled in war, so that a bow of steel is broken by his arms—

DAVID

He—he— Do you know why you have been brought here?

ABISHAG

To be a handmaiden to my King.

DAVID

Not a handmaiden, but a wife.

ABISHAG

[*In ecstasy*] Oh!
[*Covers her face.*]

DAVID

Do you rejoice? Are you frightened?
[*About to remove her hands from her face.*]

ABISHAG

[*Herself lowering her hands.*]

Oh, how I give thanks to the Lord that of all the daughters of Israel I should be the chosen one! Now I know why He made me so beautiful. Oh! To be the wife of King David!

DAVID

[*Looks upon her for a while. His breath comes fast. He is roused.*]

Give me a kiss, most beautiful of Israel's daughters!

ABISHAG

[*Her eyes closed, passionately, she brings her lips toward the King.*]

Oh!

[*They unite in a long kiss.*]

DAVID

Soon I, too, shall believe that King David is not old.—Come, I want now to celebrate my marriage to you. The wine is ready.—Can you drink, sweet child?

ABISHAG

If I should get drunk, the bed is not far.

DAVID

Ah— Ha, ha! Drink, you flame, and set me afire!

ABISHAG

Ah, king, how happy I am! How my heart beats,—how my pulse throbs with a wild wedding dance!

[*Gulps down her wine.*]

DAVID

[*Passionately*] You!

[*Seizes her by the waist, bends back her head and kisses her. He stops abruptly.*]

Tell me, has any man tasted your kisses before me?

ABISHAG

No, they were all treasured up for the king.

DAVID

And have you no longing in your heart?

ABISHAG

Longing?

DAVID

For some one who is handsome and young and fascinating.

ABISHAG

[*Embarrassed*] Only for your embraces.

DAVID

[*Begins to kiss her anew, and with his lips upon hers he lifts her up in his arms.*]

King David is not old! King David has found his heat and his fire!

[*Carries her to the bed. Suddenly he stands still, shuts his eyes, meditates, and gradually releases* ABISHAG. *He opens his eyes, gazes upon her, thrusts her gently away, still holding her by the arm and at last speaks.*]

Yes, so shall it be.

ABISHAG

[*Frightened*] What is it, my King?

DAVID

[*After a pause*] You shall not be my wife.

ABISHAG

Have I sinned in anything, my King? Have I acted ill or unbecomingly? Will you send me away? Oh, where shall I take my shame? Where shall I hide myself with my disgrace?

DAVID

[*Drawing her passionately to his bosom*]
No, you shall not forsake me, you shall be with me. Day and night shall you be near me, to cherish and comfort me. You shall be my sun, who, with his beams, will open my eyes in the morning, and you shall be the last one that sleep will take from my sight. Wherever I stretch forth my hand, let the velvet of your skin pour balm through my fingers; let the perfume of your hair be henceforth the only incense to refresh my heart; let the kiss from your lips be the key to my own. But you shall not be my wife.

ABISHAG

Oh, then I am not worthy?

DAVID

Seek not the reason in yourself, glorious woman.

King David met you too late. Now he does not dare to drink the full measure of his happiness.

ABISHAG

I am too ignorant, my King. I do not understand you.

DAVID

All my life long have I been fire and motion, and thought that I should be the bush that burns with fire and yet is never consumed. Like you, I, too, believed that I could never grow old, and that my body would easily bear the burden of the years. And now, see— Your hero is old and cold. King David's youth and strength have fled like the dawn and like the spring. Night has come, and winter. They wrap me in covers and I get no heat, and all my vigor has forsaken me. You were brought to give me heat. The beauty of your youth, the splendor of your womanhood was to rouse my manhood to new vigor. Your buoyant youth was to make me young again. And all this happened at sight of you. Yet suddenly I was seized with the feeling that only the desire for you can keep me warm.

ABISHAG

The desire for me? What does that mean?

DAVID

It is as if a difficult riddle had been given you to solve. You go about, and ponder and ponder, and can find no rest in your search for the answer. You lose all desire to eat, and at night sleep is driven from your eyes. Your whole body feels the tension; every limb is athrob with anxiety. Yet when at last you solve the difficult riddle your head feels free once more, your heart again is light, the tension is relieved and your whole being relaxes, at ease.

ABISHAG

You offer me a difficult riddle. What shall I do with it?

DAVID

You are my riddle! The desire for you will wake all my powers, will heat my blood, will make my heart throb with new strength. The yearning for you will be a sharp goad that will not let me fall asleep and turn to ice. But

were you to become my wife, you would be a riddle that had already been solved. And what would then warm King David?

ABISHAG

Oh, King, even as your wife I will be your eternal flame.

DAVID

That is what I want. I want you to be my eternal flame. That is why you must remain a great longing, and must never become a fulfillment.

ABISHAG

Longing—fulfillment— My King, I do not know what you mean.

DAVID

[*Kissing her passionately*] You guileless child!

ABISHAG

But you will not send me away from you?

DAVID

No. You have heard me promise that. I will bind you to me and be bound to you.

ABISHAG

As a man is to his wife?

DAVID

As a man to his wife, and even more strongly.

ABISHAG

Then I *am* really your wife! Then I *am* really your wife!

DAVID

My virginal, immaculate, my eternal flame that must never cease to burn.

ABISHAG

[*Ecstatically*] Ha-ha! Then I *am* King David's wife!

[*Begins to dance wildly and voluptuously.*]

DAVID

Dance, pure woman! Dance, glorious creature! Pour glowing coals over my being with the motions of your youthful, lissome limbs.

ABISHAG

[*Her dance grows wilder and more voluptuous.*

She sings her accompaniment as she whirls about.]

DAVID

[*Spreads out his arms, throws out his chest and breathes deeply.*]

For this, oh Lord, I thank Thee, and sing praises to Thy name!